

Evangelistic Failures and Imperial Anxieties among  
Nineteenth-Century American Missionaries to the Zulu

Doug Bafford

Paper Presented at the Science, Religion, and Culture Program Annual Research Symposium,  
Harvard Divinity School, Cambridge, MA

May 15, 2017

Out of all the Christian involvement in nineteenth-century Zululand, a kingdom comprised of several southern African peoples under the leadership of a central Zulu monarch, one group stands out for its unusual position: the American Congregational missionaries, one of the first groups in the U.S. to send religious representatives abroad. The United States had no colonial outposts in southern Africa, but this group of nascent missionaries chose to locate there in order to spread the Gospel to those places that still witnessed relatively few Christian converts. Their organization, the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM), was established in 1810 at a meeting in western Massachusetts of Congregational alumni of Williams College. These first organizers sought funds to send willing young men and women to proselytize around the globe in places as far-flung as China, the Near East, and sub-Saharan Africa. They were inspired in their work by the success of British Christians in India; after comparably few successes of U.S. evangelization among American Indians, they were emboldened by the prospect of lands abroad whose people were *culturally* ready for progress in their attainment of Christian civilization. Moreover, their motivation for choosing the particular sites in which they sought to establish local churches was to find those places, like India, where people “could show evidence or potential of civilization” (Conroy-Krutz 2015:20-1). It was this as-then unrealized potential, and relatively easy access in a British colonial environment, that they identified in the peoples of southern Africa.

The first Americans to arrive in Zulu country came in 1834, and during the first several decades of their establishment of a series of “Zulu Missions,” they corresponded with American and British interlocutors about their successes and challenges in developing a mission virtually from scratch.<sup>1</sup> Some of their challenges were linguistic: Much of their mid-century work

---

<sup>1</sup> These letters and reports are collected as the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions archives at the Houghton Library, Harvard University. I cite these materials as ABCFM.

centered on developing biblical translations so that potential Zulu churchgoers could encounter the Word of God in their own tongue. Beyond these practical hurdles, the American missionaries hoped to sponsor churches that would draw membership and, eventually, leadership from the Zulu population. They wanted to expand the reach of Christendom as they understood it and create new communities of believers who could engage in fellowship alongside Westerners.

Despite these lofty, quintessentially evangelistic goals, the American Board faced abject failure during the first several decades of the Zulu mission. With no native converts in the first decade, the missionaries were forced to justify to themselves and their audiences in Europe and America what could account for this problem. In part the answer was related to widely circulating ideas about Zulu peoples. Nineteenth-century Westerners' impressions of the Zulu were of a martial people who would not only fight to maintain political authority over their territory but also challenge any introduction of European culture. Even today, popular Western perceptions of Zulu society reinscribe earlier models that constructed them as unusually bellicose and resistant to outside influence. Scholars who have written about the South African missionary landscape of the 1800s have noted how Zulus were particularly estranged from Christians' efforts to proselytize them, even in comparison to other groups approached by the same missionaries. As American missionaries entered southern Africa with these *a priori* notions of the challenge they would face in bringing Christianity to a staunchly "heathen" people, these widely circulating ideas conditioned how they understood their project and how they evaluated its success. However, their response to early troubles at establishing well-attended mission congregations was more complicated than a mere instantiation of similar contemporary discourse about indigenous peoples around the globe.

In this project, I want to introduce several apparently disparate themes and make the argument that they relate in an inextricable way. First, my overall question concerns how these American Christians made sense of what was a painful disappointment, and to do that, we need to consider these semiotic processes, of the quintessentially anthropological question of meaning-making (Berger 1967, Geertz 1973), although given these historical sources, mediated almost exclusively through language.<sup>2</sup> Second, it is critical to view the answers to these questions as inflected by the international political, especially imperial, contexts (cf. Sahlins 1996; Chu 2010) in which these Americans operated in southern Africa over several decades. In their attempts to explain the failure of church planting, the American Board missionaries navigated a political tightrope between the Zulu polity and the encroaching British state. On the one hand, the missionaries recognized that their entire presence in Zululand was predicated on the permission—if not outright patronage—of the Zulu monarch. Although from the earliest days they expressed reservations toward his governance, the missionaries largely depended on validation from this ruler, without whose support the mission would not have been allowed to operate within the bounds of the kingdom, control of which had been shored up only several decades prior to the arrival of the American Board. On the other hand, over the ensuing years, as British influence in the region grew at the expense of Zulu autonomy, the missionaries increasingly voiced condemnation of the Zulu polity and advocated, at times more or less bluntly, instead for British governance to act as a superior, Westernized influence on the Zulu people. Without the corrupting influence wrought by African rule, they suggested, people would be more likely to adopt Christianity. At the same time, they began to express anxieties about

---

<sup>2</sup> I follow other ethnologically-minded historians (e.g., Etherington 2002) who have examined these ABCFM sources semiotically to identify how American missionaries “read” conversion in their interlocutors’ behavior or, in the present case, explained their reluctance to convert.

being seen as a way for Americans to establish a colonial presence in southern Africa. Thus, although such a shift in discourse could be viewed in light of established Western prejudices against African political control—and indeed this is part of the story—the American missionaries' stakes in this setting must be understood in a broader international context of maneuverings with the neighboring British Cape Colony.

Finally, throughout missionary discourse directed at making sense of failure and imperial anxieties is a consistent pattern of putting political worries into the language of “character.” The English term itself appears frequently, both in the Americans' reference to the Zulu king, the people under his rule, and to themselves. Deeper than just the word itself is a kind of enduring, essentialized quality that implies a complete identification of the trait and the person, people, or “nation” being described (cf. Hirschfeld 1996). Although this part of my argument remains less articulated than the rest, I hope it can be part of my larger project, if not at the level of my other arguments, then at least a note about language use. In other words, that these missionaries so frequently invoked the idiom of character to frame their concerns about Zulu political and religious life likely plays a role in how they came to shift their stance toward Zulu governance over several decades.

The majority of the following work emerges from letters sent to and from the mission field during the first several waves of missionization. After the first American Board missionaries—only several families—arrived in the 1830s, later cohorts were sent throughout the latter half of the century, less so during periods of conflict but always returning to the same region. A central figure who has taken a significant role in chronicling the history of the mission is Lewis Grout, who arrived in the 1840s with the second generation. In recounting the early days of the mission several decades later, he acknowledged that no converts had been recorded

within the first ten years of the commencement of their work (1864:215). This resulted in part from the fact that the missionaries were forced to suspend their efforts during some of these early years due to conflicts with the British and Boers. Still, they faced daunting challenges from their potential converts, as well. Throughout the nineteenth century, even once a series of mission stations were at last established, relatively few Zulu attended. It was only once they began to accommodate alternative, localized forms of Christianity that they began to witness greater success, but these changes did not take place until after the turn of the century (2014:270).

Within one of the conventional frameworks Western missionaries adopted, this outcome was unsurprising. During the nineteenth century, the southern Africans brought under the imperial rule of the Amazulu monarch Shaka and thereafter referred to collectively as “Zulus,” gained a reputation as a “martial” people particularly resistant to the introduction of European culture and religion. “The Zulus, under [kings] Dingane and Chaka, were a nation of soldiers always engaged in war,” wrote one British military officer, who subsequently noted the “difficulty of planting the Church of Christ among a South African tribe in that state” (Malan 1876:196). Martial imagery of Zulus as inherently violent and unyielding contributed to the impression that they would be reluctant to adopt Western cultural models. Nevertheless, Christians found it problematic to write off entire populations as fundamentally *unable* to reach the promise of salvation through the Word of God, as it would run counter to their conception of ethics, which as part of a universalizing theology, held out to all the potential to become Christian, at least in principle.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> A theme that emerges here—viz., the African as hopelessly backward versus the African as potentially Christian and civilized—echoes a similar unresolved tension that would later guide the colonial enterprise. Albert Memmi (1965), for instance, describes European colonialists’ own justifications for their control over African subordinates as predicated on the continued cultural difference between the two; when African peoples started adopting many of the same outward signs of Western civilization as the colonizers, their justifications for white control over Africans was threatened. Likewise, Christian missionaries have defended the fundamental universal humanity of African peoples (e.g., as against the exploitation of the chattel slave trade) in their quest to see them as amenable to salvation

On arriving first at British-held Cape Colony, the incipient American Board travelers stayed with British missionaries with whom they had prior connections, but otherwise they had no prearranged contacts that might lend them authority in southern Africa. If they hoped to establish mission stations in Zululand, which was not then under any British control, they would have to make arrangements directly with the monarch, Dingane, who held control over the territory in which they wanted to plant churches. Over the next year they travelled from Cape Town to the Zulu capital, a trip comparatively short in distance but complicated by ongoing conflicts in the region. When they arrived and initiated formal meetings with Dingane, they were coolly received, but the king conceded to provide them a legitimate presence in the country (Grout 1864:202-3). The king hesitated to provide them close spatial access to the Zulu population centers out of an ignorance of, in Grout's words, "the character of their labors" (1864:202). So here on the one hand we have Grout framing the encounter as one of character. By presenting the case through this lens, Grout sets up a need for the Americans to demonstrate their moral fiber before a skeptical audience and, arguably, as we'll see shortly, it works the other way around. Although the missionaries were cautious about this arrangement with Dingane, they were sure that as long as they conducted their evangelizing activities with an open heart, they would be able to work alongside native leadership to effect religious and moral improvement among the Zulu.

Before returning to Grout, I want to share a brief passage by Dr. Newton Adams, who became a central figure in the mission and in conversation with the other members of second

---

(Comaroff and Comaroff 1997), but the closer Africans came to voicing European sentiments and adopting European practices, the more the tacit social hierarchy between whites as teachers and blacks as submissive pupils was destabilized. Westerners' constructions of the individual in sub-Saharan Africa combined an essential, profound otherness that distanced them from the enlightened heights of Euro-American civilization, yet they needed to exhibit at least those features that made them *potentially* Christian and proper members of civilized society, even if attaining such a status would subvert the colonial status quo.

period of missionaries, after the American Board had already developed relations with the Zulu polity and, increasingly, the British to the west. In an annual update report of 1845, Adams writes home about Grout's most recent efforts to return to the settlement at which he had tried to establish a mission station: "He designs to make another effort to get a footing in the Zulu country when the rivers are sufficiently low to allow him to enter it. Emigration from the Zulu country goes on with such rapidity as ever; and it is probably that unless the English government interfere in some way to prevent it, Umsunduzi [the intended site of the station] will soon be left with only the original Zulu tribe remaining."<sup>4</sup> Notice the description of emigration away from what Adams already constructs as a despotic influence. The fear is that under Zulu imperial control, other non-Zulu ethnic groups will be pushed out. As a possible response, which you don't see in the earlier, initial accounts from the previous decade, he calls on the hope that political interference from the English may help preserve the people's situation.

As the American Board missionaries endured in Zululand without realizing the fruits of their evangelical labors, their explanations for what had gone wrong turned from their own incipient efforts and the unfamiliarity of the people with Christianity to an actively dampening influence of the Zulu polity. As Grout (1864:174) wrote, reflecting on his experiences in the field, the people's "characteristic traits seem due less to an original peculiarity of mental constitution than to circumstances," which involved numerous forces impinging on their character, especially a host of superstitions, indigenous healing practices, and augury that together contributed a "degrading influence on the mind and heart of the people." As before, his explanation of the Zulu people being corrupted by their "circumstances"—rather than, or perhaps in tension with dominant narratives of their essentialized, unchangeable "mental constitution"—

---

<sup>4</sup> A. Adams to Rev. R. Anderson, November 3, 1845.

offered space for missionaries to craft model Christians, if only they could ameliorate those circumstances.

However, at this juncture, the ire of missionaries' condemnation shifted from a familiar emphasis on local religion and other cultural practices to the political rule under which the people were claimed to suffer. For missionaries like Grout, although he registered the influence of superstitions and cultural practices,<sup>5</sup> widespread in missionary discourse, the most powerful of these external, corrupting influences on the Zulu mind was the relatively recent consolidation of power in the hands of a sovereign king. In a telling passage from his retrospective account, he claims that

an effect upon the mind of the Amazulu, more pernicious than any which has been named, is that which results from the capricious and despotic character of their kings.... [The people] pass their lives in constant fear of incurring his displeasure, and hence, of confiscation and of death. This leads them continually into the most extravagant professions of confidence, and love, and adoration, though at heart, they may be strangers to all these affections for their sovereign. The king, in turn, learning that these professions are hollow-hearted, and that his people are not likely to obey and sustain him through love, resolves to rule them through fear. (Grout 1864:130)

While other cultural impediments may have retarded the Zulus' civilizational (and, by extension, religious) progress, it is the "capricious and despotic character of their kings" that ranks as the most "pernicious" of all influences. In contrast to the American Board's earlier need to humble themselves before the Zulu king for protection and permission to establish their mission stations

---

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., ABCFM 15.4, reel 175. American Zulu Mission Annual Report, September 12, 1849.

within the bounds of the kingdom, by the mid-1800s their members were more emboldened to target the government itself as a primary source of Zulu backwardness.

Anticipating counterclaims that the Zulu king ruled with the popular support of the people, Grout explained away any ostensible public support by arguing that displays of affection for the king were only made out of fear. Undoubtedly this response belies a certain ideal model of how governance ought to work: These missionaries were American, after all, steeped in an ideology of the state as reliant on the free, uninfluenced will of the people, so that the greatest criticism of a ruler would be to claim he has no support from the people, and any support he does have is not genuine but “hollow-hearted.” Nevertheless, what is important to note here is how Grout deployed a political criticism as a mechanism to explain the obstacles he and his brethren faced in southern Africa. Regardless of the state of Zulu peoples’ relations with the monarch, the American Board missionaries read their political landscape as a major component holding them back from the (potential) inroads that could be made in spreading the Gospel.

While the “cultural”—based in superstition, indigenous religion, and custom—and the political explanations could be distinguished as separate factors in constructing Zulu distance from Western progress, at times missionaries demonstrated an understanding that they were intimately, if not inevitably, entwined. In a letter dated 1841, only a few years after the establishment of the American Board’s venture in Zululand, one missionary wrote, “People are constantly condemned, and in most cases put to death for witchcraft. A few escape after being condemned, several have already fled to me for protection.” In discussing one recent case in particular, he described his offer of refuge to a man accused of being a witch but noted his fear that he “shall offend those who seek his life, but I have conscientiously done what I thought my

duty, and trust to the Lord to carry me through it.”<sup>6</sup> Witchcraft accusations were not attributed directly to the Zulu polity, but the king’s participation in and tolerance for this institution that plagued missionaries and, later, colonial officials becomes problematic for them.<sup>7</sup>

The Americans were not alone in their evaluations of Zulu leaders’ roles as stumbling blocks for the open spread of Christianity. In his comments on the collected volume of letters of the British missionary Annie Wilkinson, her contemporary Cornwall Caerhayes wrote,

Reference is made in this letter to the opposition on the part of parents and guardians in keeping their boys from the influence of the Christianity of the Mission station. The fountain head of this opposition was Cetywayo. Thousands there were in Zululand, compelled to fight against us during the late war, who but for his baneful heathen influence would years ago have embraced Christianity, and entered upon a civilised and useful life. (1882:49-50)

As Caerhayes read these letters at the close of the nineteenth century, the Zulu monarchy—in conjunction with the “parents and guardians” but ultimately tied responsibly to Cetewayo, the last autonomous Zulu king to be recognized by the British—was the primary obstacle faced by missionaries in their efforts to save souls. Were it not for this “heathen influence” that propelled Zululand to fight against European intervention in myriad forms, the people would have been ostensibly more open to adopting Christian practices. For British onlookers just like the Americans, Zulu religious opposition collapsed into political and military opposition in the sense that the same forces British settlers identified as halting the introduction of colonial control also effected a more difficult environment in which to spread the Gospel.

---

<sup>6</sup> ABCFM 15.4, reel 174. Letter from Aldin Grout to Mr. Hill, August 11, 1841.

<sup>7</sup> Other letters criticize the king’s management of the Zulu state.

However, the increasing alignment of the *Americans'* discourse of the Zulu political landscape with that of the British was inflected by their own increasingly anxious status in southern Africa, a broader perspective required to place this politico-religious shift in fuller context. The move from quietly accepting the Zulu king's authority to advocating for British usurpation of indigenous Zulu governance occurred just as the Americans were concerned with being seen as establishing an imperial foothold in southern Africa. I want to make a case for seeing their growing hostility toward the Zulu monarchy in the context of *both* their attempts to explain why people aren't converting *and* their subtle tensions with the British colonists. The work of historian Emily Conroy-Krutz in her monograph *Christian Imperialism* (2015) serves as a foundation on which to understand nineteenth-century American preoccupations with empire and the effects it had on Christian missions. During this period the British were encroaching on Xhosa peoples and sovereignty in Cape Colony (Price 2008). At the same time, from the early 1800s onward, some American visitors were actively encouraging U.S. authorities to colonize parts of the Cape. These imperial aspirations triggered anxiety among British observers in the Cape, who were trying to deepen their own foothold in the region and saw external claims as a threat (Conroy-Krutz 2015). For example, the English Cape press and prominent British loyalist figures like Robert Semple (Johnson 2011) wrote of the fear that American dominance would enter at first not through outright conquest but in the form of other actors who may nonetheless carry the seeds of imperialism. In response to these growing fears of American imperial presence, the missionaries sought to align themselves more with British political control of the region. Although ostensibly dressed in the language of protecting Zulu subjects' rights (to live and to worship freely), another factor in their support of the "English government" was in response to the fears of American domination. An increased friendliness with Cape Colony

allowed them to subtly mitigate the threat of American power and to continue to do their evangelizing work.

Even in the face of these challenges, missionaries expressed the enduring hope that Christianity could be a panacea for the moral and physical corruption facing the Zulu people. In response to the corroding moral effect of the expanding Zulu kingdom, Lewis Grout insisted that “the only real remedy for all these evils is the blessed gospel of the Son of God. Under the teachings of the Bible such mental and moral changes have been wrought among the Zulus, as to prove the power of Christianity to meet even the degraded South African’s spiritual wants” (1864:131). However, I argue that it was not simply religion, or even Western prejudices against African self-governance, that conditioned these sentiments. As the political landscape of southern Africa shifted in the middle of the nineteenth century, the Americans found themselves caught between the need to maintain hospitable relations with their Zulu hosts and the conviction that Western governance (namely, the British colonists) would alleviate the barriers to salvation erected by the Zulu kings. As the American themselves faced the threat of hostility from a British public gazing askance at the U.S. presence in the region, they navigated between implicit support for external leadership and their position as independent patrons of the royal court. All these forces contributed to the complex justifications for the mission’s failure to achieve success in its first few decades.

## References Cited

Berger, Peter L.

1967 *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*. New York: Anchor Books.

Caerhayes, Cornwall, ed.

1882 *A Lady's Life and Travels in Zululand and the Transvaal during Ceteyayo's Reign, Being the African Letters and Journals of the Late Mrs. Wilkinson*. London: J.T. Hayes.

Chu, Julie Y.

2010 *Cosmologies of Credit: Transnational Mobility and the Politics of Destination in China*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Comaroff, John L. and Jean Comaroff

1997 *Of Revelation and Revolution, Volume Two: The Dialectics of Modernity on a South African Frontier*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Conroy-Krutz, Emily

2015 *Christian Imperialism: Converting the World in the Early American Republic*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Etherington, Norman

2002 *Outward and Visible Signs of Conversion in Nineteenth-Century KwaZulu-Natal*. *Journal of Religion in Africa* 32(4):422-439.

Geertz, Clifford

1973 *Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture*. *In The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. Pp. 3-30. New York: Basic Books.

Grout, Lewis

1864 Zulu-Land; or, Life among the Zulu-Kafirs of Natal and Zulu-Land, South Africa.

Philadelphia: Presbyterian Publication Committee.

Hirschfeld, Lawrence A.

1996 Race in the Making: Cognition, Culture, and the Child's Construction of Human

Kinds. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Johnson, David

2011 Imagining the Cape Colony: History, Literature, and the South African Nation.

Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Malan, Charles Hamilton

1876 South African Missions. London: James Nisbet & Co.

Memmi, Albert

1965 The Colonizer and the Colonized. Boston: Beacon Press.

Price, Vincent

2008 Making Empire: Colonial Encounters and the Creation of Imperial Rule in Nineteenth-

Century Africa. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Sahlins, Marshall

1996 The Sadness of Sweetness: The Native Anthropology of Western Cosmology. *Current*

*Anthropology* 37(3):395-428.